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The Reign of Syntax

In the second-hand book-stalls of New York it is often possible to purchase, for a small sum, a large book purporting to be an edition of Vergil for school purposes, which, in 1827, the Rev. J. G. Cooper of that city published, after keeping it in manuscript more than twelve years. The first pages contain recommendations of the book and testimonies to its excellences—by William Harris, President of Columbia College, John Bowden, Professor of Rhetoric, etc., at Columbia College, John Borland, A.M., Teacher in a Select Classical School, James Renwick, Professor of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry at Columbia (!), John T. Kirkland, President of Harvard University, and, finally, nine (!) Principals of Classical Academies in New York, ten (!) in Philadelphia and five in Baltimore.

In spite of all this, the edition is not a good one. But it may be worth while to consider briefly what sort of a book, in 1827, elicited the approval of the Presidents of Harvard and Columbia.

Mr. Cooper finds that the editions that have preceded his, those of Ruæus and Davidson, "were objectionable, the former by affording too little aid to the student, the latter by affording him too much". Mr. Cooper's edition is to take exactly the middle course between these two extremes. We read on to find that "The notes and explanations are copious. They embrace whatever was deemed necessary to elucidate the poet, and to lead the youthful mind to relish his beauties". Further, the editor has, at the suggestion of several eminent teachers, added a number of questions which may be modified or increased at pleasure. This, it would appear, is in the nature of an innovation.

"This method of instruction, by question and answer, will be found useful. It serves to excite inquiry and attention on the part of the student, and affords the teacher a ready method of discovering the degree of knowledge which he has obtained of the subject".

When we examine the copious notes and explanations, we find that they are of two kinds. First, there is an *ordo* in the margin, i. e. almost half the Latin lines are rewritten in the margin, in the order in which they would be literally rendered in English. Thus, Aen 2. 505, *tenent Danai qua deficit ignis*, is rewritten *Danai tenent locum qua ignis deficit*, and 2. 509 is rearranged thus: *senior nequicquam circumdat arma diu desueta humeris trementibus aevo*.

But the notes at the bottom of the page also contain English versions of a great many lines and phrases, most of them of no extraordinary difficulty. We are forcibly reminded of the statement of President Kirkland of Harvard in the Preface, that "the book provides for a portion of that assistance in the interpretation of the poet for which resort is frequently and injudiciously had to translations". It is even so. The notes tell us that *ingentibus tectis* means "in the spacious apartments—halls"; that *limina tectorum convulsa* means "the doors of his palace torn down", and that *ibis nuntiusi* means "you shall go as messenger".

This information, for which resort would otherwise injudiciously be had to translations, is by no means all that the bottom of the pages contains. There is a rich commentary which often has the charm of real ingenuity. So, on Aen. 2. 501, the *centum nurus* of Hecuba are accounted for by supposing that each of the fifty sons of Priam had more than one wife, who "in the whole might make the exact number of a hundred". We learn on Aen. 2. 772 that "The introduction of Creüsa's ghost is extremely well timed. No other expedient could be found to stop the further search of Aeneas for his wife. . . . It shows the judgment of the poet". And on Aen. 4. 198 we read: "This Ammon some will have to be the same with Ham, the son of Noah. Sir Isaac Newton thinks him to have been the father of Sesostris, and cotemporary with Solomon, king of Israel".

As for the method of question and answer, so useful to excite inquiry and attention, we pick at random the last three questions appended to Book 2 of the Aeneid.

After his return to the place of rendezvous, did he find great numbers there collected?

Did they consider him their leader and king?

Were they prepared and willing to undertake any enterprise, he might think proper?

However, more significant than what he inserts is an element that he omits. Of the 611 pages, some five-eighths are explanation and three-eighths are text. But nowhere does there seem to be a single allusion to syntax. That must have been deliberate choice, for Gideon Blackburn, D.D., of Louisville, Ky., writes in 1823 that the editor "exhibits an intimate acquaintance with the syntax of the Latin language". Syntax, to be sure, forms a prominent part of only a few editions of Vergil at the present time, but we must remember that Vergil was read in those days by pupils considerably less advanced in years and general training than is the case now, and such an edition as that of Mr. Cooper ought rather to be studied in comparison with editions of Cicero or even of Caesar.

If that comparison is instituted, it will be at once seen that the dissidence is an extreme one. In Mr. Cooper's edition, there are no syntactical references; in the corresponding editions of our day, the notes, to the extent of twenty-five per cent or more, deal with syntax. Our editions, also, contain a deal of matter of which President Kirkland would have said that it renders resort to a translation injudicious, because unnecessary. In that respect 1827 and 1915 are less unlike than one might imagine. But in the matter of syntax, we have plainly progressed far.

When did the change take place? It is obviously impossible at this point to trace the development of classical teaching in this country, fascinating and instructive as that chapter of American educational history would be. But it is clear that, in 1827, the young gentlemen of New York were required to know much less—if anything at all—of the subtle psychology implicit in clauses of volition and effect, in defining and descriptive temporal clauses, than are their successors.

We of the passing generation may remember that we found syntax firmly established, that in our first recitation on an actual author a goodly fraction of the time was spent in labelling the case and mode instances of the assigned portion. If we may judge by Mr. Cooper's book, that was not the practice two or three generations before us.

In one respect, Mr. Cooper's book has a distinct advantage. That consists in the singleness and directness of its purpose. In all the recommendations, in all the comments, we hear constantly and solely of attempts to understand the author. "Render the poet intelligible", "elucidating and illustrating the poet", are the common phrases. We have changed the viewpoint somewhat. We are also sincerely intent upon illustrating the poet, upon rendering him intelligible to our generation. If nothing else, the pains we spend on equipping our books with adequate archaeological apparatus would of themselves show our interest in the matter. And we may even say that now, as seems to have been the case then, that is our primary concern. But there are many who regard the syntactical drill as leading to a different and independent end, as providing a mental discipline in itself, quite irrespective of the elucidation of the author that may or may not be derived from it. At all times, of course, it was contended and believed that a valuable mental discipline was inherent in the study of the classical authors, but its value was partially dependent on its being indirectly pursued. All the attention was concentrated on the immediate business in hand, the full comprehension of the author read. To-day, we pursue the mental discipline directly as well as indirectly and, more particularly, by the drill in syntax which was and is so prominent a feature of Latin text-book and recitation.

Now, of one thing we may be sure. Drill in syntax was not introduced with the set purpose of giving this mental discipline. Whenever it actually did happen—and it was undoubtedly a gradual and scarcely noticed phenomenon—, humanistic studies were still in undisputed possession of their century-old primacy. Serious challenge of that position had not yet been made. Whatever changes or modifications of their methods the teachers of that time chose to introduce, they would have felt no need of self-justification and would have offered none. Syntax came into the Schools in consequence of practical, not of theoretical, considerations—to meet a class-room condition and not to satisfy a philosophical requirement.

We have not far to seek to discover the class-room condition. At all times, the ancient enemy of the classical teacher was precisely that translation which, as the President of Harvard admitted, was both frequently and injudiciously used. This translation has been combated by generation after generation of school masters, but quite unavailingly. And the combat has been unavailing, because, to achieve certain ends, the pony is not an injudicious instrument, but an eminently judicious one.

Let us take the third year of Latin, as it was until recently and had been for at least twenty years before. The required reading was six orations of Cicero, amounting altogether to about seventy-four pages of solid Teubner text. This work was covered in the public High Schools in about 152 recitations. This allowed something less than half a page per recitation, or about eighteen lines. Now, if the pupil knew that at the end of the quarter, or the term, or the year, his success in his work would be measured by his ability to render in English a certain portion of these seventy-four pages or by the number of times he had been able to repeat each day the English rendering of the eighteen lines assigned for the day, he would very normally seek to achieve such success by the shortest and easiest method. And it is much easier to read the translation in the 'pony' than to work it out with the help of the notes and the vocabulary. We may tell the boy that he should not do so, that it is dishonest; but, if we tell him, as we sometimes do, that it is not an effective method to reach the goal in question, he could retort to our charge of dishonesty with a *tu quoque!*

As a matter of fact, that is precisely the way in which success in the study of Latin and Greek used to be tested, and the pony was the means used by the majority of students to pass the test successfully. More than a hundred years ago, catalogues of the Boston Latin School stated that "translations, keys and interpretations were not permitted in the school grounds". They managed to get in, however, and schemes to oust them were soon abandoned in favor of schemes to limit their influence.

What plans were tried and discarded the records do not tell. But one plan was successful and has maintained itself to our day. That was to make the drill in syntax a formal part of every lesson, to demand of the pupil not merely the result of the application of grammatical categories to the text, but the actual application of them. To acquire this information necessitated more or less attention in the class-room and a certain amount of home-study. And it was not in the pony.

The scheme was an ingenious one. Translation of set amounts was still demanded, and for this translation the pony continued to be most useful. But other information, of which the pony knew nothing, was also demanded, so that exclusive reliance on the pony became in fact injudicious.

The same tendency which sought to limit the influence of the pony by introducing drill in syntax acted still further, in increasing the amount of that drill and correspondingly lessening the amount required for reading. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, unbelievable amounts of reading seem to have been required. These have been steadily reduced to the present scheme of two books of Caesar, four orations of Cicero and four books of Vergil. We may safely say that the pony is less used now than formerly, because less required translation is set for examinations.

Now, we still conceive that our principal function is the exposition of a literature. And it must be evident that the syntax which we have summoned to our assistance against the pony is not strictly a form of literary discipline, but is a branch of formal logic, both of the inductive and the deductive type. As such, it has no doubt a high value, but it is something different from our original programme and somewhat hard to associate with that programme. There was little pretense that by means of mode and case categories we were assisted in the elucidation and illustration of the author.

The existing difference of opinion as to the reality or the value of the mental discipline secured by syntax need not concern us. I should not like to seem to accede to the accepted dogma of the worthlessness of formal training. The humanist has always claimed for the subject-matter of his studies the power to cultivate intellectual aptitudes of the highest order, and, in our own special case, has maintained for Latin the very important practical value of facilitating command of English. But those were consequences which he derived from the whole-hearted study of the subject-matter;—the literature and the history of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. Whatever value may be attached to the drill in syntax by the warmest of its advocates, no one will assert that this value is equal to that of the aptitudes above alluded to. We find, therefore, that, in the course of a hundred years, we have been steadily substituting for the better quality of educational wares a somewhat inferior quality. We have been increasing the amount of alloy in our coins—although we insist that the alloy is not altogether a base metal.

We have done this not of our own accord, but driven by practical necessities. Attacked by the pony, we defended ourselves by the aid of mercenaries. Linguistic analysis has been closely allied to the study of Latin and Greek by a series of historical accidents, but, as a form of logic rather than of literature, it is something of a stranger. It is no more an essential part of classical studies than it is an essential part of the study of any other group of languages.

Keeping in mind that the singleness of purpose which distinguished Mr. Cooper's edition was something which classical teachers would gladly retain, that, further, syntax was intended to be a means to an end, we may legitimately raise the question whether, in the light of our vastly enlarged experience, it is the only means. Recently another means has been suggested and even partly embodied in courses of study, which seems likely to eliminate the pony completely, if fully carried out. Without tests of some sort, oral or written, periodic or irregular, there can, of course, be no teaching. As long as these tests could be successfully passed by cramming the translation, they would continue to be so passed. But if they were of 'unseen' passages, 'sight-translations', the pony would be of little value.

But to abolish the pony, they must be wholly of sight-passages. If a part of them, as is at present the case, consists of passages previously studied, the pony for

that part will be put into immediate requisition. Since nobody questions that power is vastly better tested by examination on passages previously unseen than by examinations on passages previously prepared, since the possibility of getting rid of the pony is actually presented to us, our hesitation in doing completely what we are now doing partially—i. e. to make the determining tests consist wholly of passages previously unseen—can be due only to a natural but indefensible conservatism.

If that should be done, the drill in syntax has lost its occupation, as far as the study of the text is concerned. And that means an enormous increase in the time that can be spent in matters that tend directly to elucidate and illustrate the author read and to lead the youthful mind to relish his beauties.

I have above asserted that linguistic analysis, though historically connected with classical studies, is no essential part of them. But I have no intention of foregoing the prior lien which Latin and Greek have upon this important and, to me, fascinating branch of mental endeavor. Only, I should like to see it really an endeavor, and not merely a memory drill. In too many books, in too many class-rooms, syntax means merely the restatement of a classification which is referred to in the notes either directly, or by means of citing the paragraph in the Grammar where it is named. Or, if it is not found in the notes, it is dictated in the class-room. Plainly, that is not linguistic analysis; that is not syntactical drill. That is, at best, mnemonic exercise, and, at worst, vanity of vanities.

But there is no reason why syntax should be dealt with in that way. There is a traditional part of teaching in Latin and Greek for which it has a direct and apparent value, where syntactical categories can be applied under the most favorable conditions. That is what is now known as 'prose', formerly called 'making Latin'. To be able to name and tabulate such phrases as *magno cum timore, omnibus copiis, his rebus inducti* may be something. But surely the pupil's knowledge of the force of the ablative is fuller and richer, if he can correctly render, in Latin, English phrases containing such undifferentiated particles as 'with' or 'by'. And since 'making Latin' is a regular part of our Latin work, it would seem the part of prudence to confine to it the syntactical drill it can so well utilize.

With all tests depending on sight-passages, with prose retained as an essential part of the work, we shall find the means of exercising our old enemy ready to our hand. We shall be able to say honestly, and not with our tongues in our cheeks, that the pony is not a help, but a hindrance to the probable success of the pupil in satisfying the demands made upon him. And we shall be able to prove our assertions drastically¹.

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¹Reference may be made here to the discussion at the recent meeting of The Classical Association of New England, of the part tests in sight-reading should play in the Latin work of the first year in College: see *THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY*, 8. 193-194.